

Building Corpsmen Culture: A Short History of the Hospital Corps "A" School

U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

Story by [André Sobocinski](#)

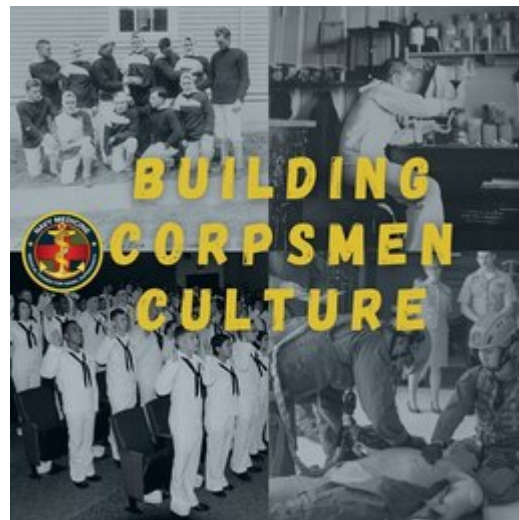
Date: 06.11.2021

Posted: 06.11.2021 15:43

News ID: 398748

A Hospital Corpsman does not become a Corpsman without extensive training. And training remains a constant for every Corpsman's career. This was certainly well known when the Hospital Corps was being planned in the 1890s and is very the reason for the Name "Hospital Corpsman." The naval hospital was the chief platform from where sailors would learn to become Corpsmen.

Over the history of the Hospital Corps the Navy has continued to develop and ensure that Corpsmen always have the requisite skills for practicing their trade aboard ship and ashore. These efforts include the establishment of the first Basic School in 1902, the development of the first "C" Schools in the 1910s, the formation of the first advanced or IDC school in World War I, the advent of field medical training in World War II and Korea to the trauma training initiative and the dynamic training collaborations that we continue to build on today.



For nearly as long as there has been a Hospital Corps, the Basic or "A" School has served as the cornerstone for training, and charged with imparting the fundamental values, traditions and requisite tools to prospective Corpsmen.

On June 18, 1914, the Navy established the Hospital Corps School at the Naval Training Station in Newport, R.I. Although not the Navy's first foray into training Corpsmen, this school represented the start of an unbroken commitment to training Corpsmen which continues to this day at the Joint Base-San Antonio-Fort Sam Houston.

Just over a decade before the Newport School was founded, the Navy spearheaded the concept of a Hospital Corps training on the campus of Naval Hospital Norfolk (Portsmouth) in Virginia. Course work for what was called the "Naval Hospital Corps Training School" was comprised of three months of instruction in nursing, elementary anatomy, physiology, elementary hygiene, materia medica and pharmacy, bandaging and splints, first aid, and discipline and drill. Upon course completion, each graduate was assigned to a naval hospital for a period of practical instruction before detailed to a ship or station. On December 15, 1902, the Navy bestowed certificates to the first ever graduating class of a Corps School. Owing to the alphabetical order in which certificates were awarded Hospital Apprentice Max Armstrong of Oskaloosa, Iowa, earned the distinction as the first Corps School graduate in history.

The impact of specially trained corpsmen was a gradual but significant innovation. Within two years of the Norfolk School's founding Corps School graduates represented 25 percent of the entire Hospital Corps. By October 1909, graduates made up over 50 percent of the active Hospital Corps.

Corps School's First Relocation:

Long before the Hospital Corps School Great Lakes relocated to San Antonio in 2011, there had already been some precedence for relocating Corps Schools. The Hospital Corps School San Francisco (Yerba Buena) moved to Naval Hospital Mare Island and then to San Diego in the 1920s. And the Navy's original Basic School relocated to

Washington, D.C., in 1907 while the Naval Hospital Norfolk was in the midst of a massive "modernization" project.

The Corps School's new home was the recently vacated Naval Hospital building on 9th and Pennsylvania Avenue, SE in Washington, D.C. The new school house was located just blocks away from the Washington Navy Yard and the Marine Barracks and just over four miles from the home of the Naval Hospital and Naval Medical School. The move was not without some controversy. The hospital building offered limited room for growth and some in Navy Medicine thought the Nation's Capital was a "less than ideal" location due to "corrupting influences."

Rear Adm. Presley Rixey, Surgeon General of the Navy, remarked that: "While class rooms and living quarters for the men are in themselves healthy and fairly well adapted to the requirements, the lack of grounds about the building for exercise and drill is a serious drawback. Moreover, the close proximity of the streets and dwellings nearby afford opportunities for mischief, which young men naturally do not overlook, thus, often inadvertently, involve themselves in trouble and bring the uniform, into disrepute."

The Disestablishment of Corps School:

Throughout the history of Hospital Corps School there has always been a desire to enhance learning opportunities for Corpsmen and adapt the curriculum to the current and future needs of the Navy. In recent years this can be seen with the implementation of mandatory Personnel Qualification Standards (PWS) and the development of the trauma training initiative. Back in 1908, leadership sought to supplement the classroom experience by sending students from Class No. 14 to the newly renovated USS Relief as it circumnavigated the globe with the "Great White Fleet."

The Relief's Commanding Officer, Dr. Charles Francis Stokes had long been a proponent of practical instruction of Corpsmen and believed that training recruits at sea "obviates the need for [a] training school." Two years later as the new Surgeon General, Stokes took immediate action to change the way corpsmen were trained. On February 11, 1911, upon the graduation of Class No. 20, the Hospital Corps School Washington, D.C., was disestablished leaving the Navy without a school to train corpsmen. Under the Navy's program, all hospital apprentices first class and hospital apprentices received practical and "on the job" training aboard ships and at hospitals in medical and surgical nursing; materia medica and practical pharmacy; emergency surgery and first aid; application of splints and occlusive dressings; bandaging; anatomy and physiology; transportation methods; aseptic operation drill; sterilization; preparation of patient for operation; hygiene, personal and shipboard; venereal prophylaxis; medical records; as well as care of instruments and medical stores.

In his report to the Secretary of the Navy, Rear Adm. Stokes wrote that "the plan has demonstrated its value. It is of particular benefit to hospitals, where the majority of patients need the care of experienced men."

To supplement this practical training, the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) also began preparing an educational manual for corpsmen that would be known as the Handy-Book of the Hospital Corps (and later, The Hospital Corps Handbook).

"A" School in Newport:

In Spring 1914, as the typewritten pages of The Handy-book of the Hospital Corps were being prepared for printing, Rear Adm. William C. Braisted was settling into his post as the newly appointed Surgeon General of the Navy. The new "SG" had served as an aide to Presley Rixey, one of the forces behind the original Hospital Corps School in Norfolk, and held that prospective corpsmen needed the structure of a school in addition to the "hands on" training. He tasked Surgeon Frank W. McCullough, USN, to locate a new home for the proposed Hospital Corps School at the Navy Training Station in Newport, R.I. (then the largest and oldest in the Navy).

As to the location of the new school house, McCullough chose the vacated Naval Hospital Newport building on Coasters Harbor Island, adjacent to the Training Station. The old hospital building was an imposing and attractive wooden structure measuring 60 feet long and 33 feet wide. Its three-story central building was flanked by two

single story wings that originally served as the hospital's wards. At its peak it could house as many as 102 patients; following its transformation to a schoolhouse it would accommodate as many as 100 students. The former wards were to be used as classrooms and laboratories.

The corridors contained specimens of crude drugs and exhibits. Closets and quarters now held stretchers and litters, sterilizing outfits, supply tables. Large ward equipped with small lecture platform and 100 desks and seats arranged in rows and aisles. All lectures except those relating to lab subjects are given here.

The new Corps School provided a six month training course embracing everything in the Handy-Book of the Hospital Corps. And upon graduation, all newly minted corpsmen were sent to naval hospitals where they would receive additional practical nursing training for six months before being sent to sea.

Postscript:

A year after Newport was established, the Navy formed a second Hospital Corps School in Yerba Buena (San Francisco), Calif. Newport and Yerba Buena continued to serve as the first stop for all prospective Corpsmen into the 1920s.

During World War I, additional Basic Schools were established at Great Lakes, Ill., Norfolk, Virginia, and temporary schools were stood up at the College of Pharmacy at Columbia University, University of Minnesota and the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy. In 1921, the Navy closed Hospital Corps Schools Newport and Great Lakes. The latter school was later reopened in 1942.

In the history of Hospital Corps training nothing quite compares to World War II though. During the war years the Navy operated Basic Corps Schools in Bainbridge and Bethesda, Maryland, Brooklyn, N.Y., Farragut, Idaho, Great Lakes, Ill., Portsmouth, Virginia, Sampson, N.Y., and San Diego, Calif. Collectively these schools prepared some 120,000 Corpsmen for the war effort -- a feat that will surely remain unsurpassed.

Sources:

Braisted, William to JAG. October 23, 1914 (126447). BUMED Correspondence Collection, Record Group 52. National Archives I, Washington, D.C.

Dixon, B.F. "The Old School." The Hospital Corps Quarterly, Vol. XVI, No.3, July 1943. p168.

Gray, David. Many Specialties, One Corps: A Pictorial History of the U.S. Navy Medical Service Corps (2nd Edition). Brookfield, MO: Donning Company Publishers, 2017.

"Hospital Corps," Report of the Surgeon-General U.S. Navy to the Secretary of the Navy, 1903. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1903. pp7-8.

"Hospital Corps Training School," Report of the Surgeon-General U.S. Navy to the Secretary of the Navy, 1906. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1906. p15.

"Hospital Corps Training School," Report of the Surgeon-General U.S. Navy to the Secretary of the Navy, 1909. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909. pp28-29.

"Hospital Corps Training School," Report of the Surgeon-General U.S. Navy to the Secretary of the Navy, 1910. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1910. p19.

"Hospital Corps," Report of the Surgeon-General U.S. Navy to the Secretary of the Navy, 1914. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1914. p19.

McCullough to Braisted, May 2, 1914 (126447). BUMED Correspondence Collection, Record Group 52. National

Archives I, Washington, D.C.

McCullough to Braisted. May 27, 1914 (126447). BUMED Correspondence Collection, Record Group 52. National Archives I, Washington, D.C.

"Policies," Report of the Surgeon-General U.S. Navy to the Secretary of the Navy, 1912. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912. p25.

"United States Naval Hospital Corps." Report of the Surgeon-General U.S. Navy to the Secretary of the Navy, 1902. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1902, pp8-9.